FOG, ICE and an ELVA

by LCdr. Krist Zimmerman

As the only pilot on a Lynx "flight" (the British Royal Navy term for "detachment"), I was tasked to fly in all kinds of weather on all types of missions. I thought my Lynx training in the typically rainy, foggy and windy British weather had prepared me for everything. I had launched and landed in sea state 5-to-6 conditions for initial DLQs, during day and night.

I'd flown my QHI check (NATOPS check) in 500 and 1 conditions and worse. And I'd conducted night USW-SUW missions at 100 feet and 120 knots—sans goggles. Before my seven-month deployment patrolling the Falkland Islands and surrounding areas, I thought I was ready.

I woke up one day to an awesome, CAVU morning. Anchored in Grytviken Harbor in the South Georgia Islands (roughly 900 nm ESE of the Falklands), we prepared to fly fishery-protection patrol around the northwest side, looking for illegal fishing boats. The weather brief included a dew point spread of one to two degrees, a water temp of 9 degrees Celsius, and a high-pressure system hanging over the area. I could see a dense fog bank just outside the entrance to the harbor. Since I also was trained as the ship's weather guesser, I recommended that even though the weather seemed great over the islands, we should not fly until the fog burned off. Everyone concurred.

The ship pulled out of the harbor into the fog. While we waited in the hangar, the CO called down and told us to launch because the weather had improved to approximately 500 and 3. I looked outside, saw he was correct, and informed him this was the proverbial "sucker's gap." Upon further discussion with the flight commander and our flight observer (known as FLOBS) under training, we

Photo-composite by Patricia Eaton

BERGS, —Who Needs ORM?

decided to launch and increase the ship's radar coverage of the area. FLOBS and I launched to starboard and pulled power straight into the clouds at 200 feet. After descending to 100 feet and out of the clouds, we elected to continue because our radar was working, visibility was three miles, and we were the only aircraft within 900 nm. Oh, I forgot to mention why we needed radar: The several hundred icebergs in the area reached up to 300 feet. We thought it would be a good idea to know where they were.

Forty-five minutes later, we found ourselves once again in and out of the fog. "Are we clear of all the icebergs?" I asked FLOBS.

"Yes we are," he replied. We slowly descended to 50 feet (minimum height for Lynx missions over water) as the cloud base kept lowering. At 50 feet, we were in continuous fog. What to do, what to do, what to do? Climb, climb, climb! We climbed up through 2,000 feet with no clear sky in sight. I'd had enough and leveled off, because the winds were causing us to crab significantly. I called the ship and informed them we were RTB. They replied, "CO concurs with your RTB. We're in a fog bank. Recommend ELVA [*Emergency Low Visibility Approach*] recovery." Great!

FLOBS gave us a steer to mother and kept us away from the icebergs. As we approached our ship, we asked for the ELVA with smoke lights. They were waiting for us and took control while FLOBS monitored our progress on radar. Our aircraft controller brought us in exactly on lineup, with only minor corrections. Slowing to 40 knots and leveling at 40 feet, we came upon the first of five smoke lights. Normally we should've had the ship in sight after the fourth smoke light, but we didn't. We saw the fifth light and continued to motor forward at 40 feet. Our aircraft controller asked if we could see the flight deck yet. We looked out the window. No dice.

Just as we were about to wave off to try it again, I caught sight of the top of the hangar through the chin bubble. "Hangar in sight. We're comin' down," I radioed back. I glued my eyes to that spot. We slowly lowered our hover and let the ship pull away. With the flight deck now partly obscured but indeed below us, the tension in the cockpit eased. After an uneventful landing and shutdown, I vowed never to get suckered in by the weather, or the perceived need to complete an unwarranted mission. A very worried looking flight commander waited for us in the hangar. "I'm so glad you're back safely," he said. So were we.

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Initially, I was skeptical of ORM upon its inception. However, now that I think about all the bonehead things I've done or have seen others do, I know ORM could have increased my awareness of those hazardous situations. If an ORM tool, such as the Flight Risk Management worksheet we use in HSL-43, would have been available that foggy day, I would've been sitting in the ship's wardroom drinking a Guinness and staring at the fog, rather than flying through it.

LCdr. Zimmerman is the safety officer at HSL-43. This event occurred while he was attached to HMS Northumberland flight as a Navy Personnel Exchange Program Officer in 1996.